

Navigating Institutional Voids and Entrepreneurial Agency

A Qualitative Exploration of the Angolan Business Landscape (2000–2026)

Isabel dos Santos¹, Luísa Tchinhama^{1,2}, Adriano Kapango^{3,4}

Carlos Manuel^{5,6}

Jean Piaget University of Angola | Catholic University of Angola | Department of Advanced Studies, Instituto Superior Politécnico Metropolitano de Angola (IMETRO) | Agostinho Neto University, Luanda | Department of Research, Jean Piaget University of Angola | Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Agostinho Neto University, Luanda

Correspondence: isantos@hotmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Angola's post-conflict economy is characterised by significant institutional voids, yet a dynamic entrepreneurial sector persists. The interplay between these structural constraints and individual agency remains underexplored, particularly through qualitative lenses that capture lived experience. This study aims to elucidate how entrepreneurs perceive, interpret, and navigate institutional voids, and to theorise the mechanisms of agency they employ to build and sustain ventures within this challenging context. A longitudinal, multi-case qualitative design was employed. Data were collected via 42 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with founders and senior managers of small and medium-sized enterprises, supplemented by ethnographic observation and document analysis. Data were analysed using a reflexive thematic approach. Analysis identified a core theme of 'negotiated embeddedness', where entrepreneurs strategically engage with informal networks to compensate for formal institutional deficiencies. A prominent finding was that over 70% of participants described creating parallel, private infrastructure for core functions like security and logistics as a critical, yet costly, survival strategy. Entrepreneurial agency in Angola is not merely reactive to voids but involves proactive, nuanced strategies of negotiation and substitution. This agency, however, is often channeled into building private alternatives rather than reforming public institutions, which may entrench a dualistic economic system. Policymakers should focus on co-designing formal institutions with entrepreneurial stakeholders to enhance legitimacy and reduce reliance on costly private workarounds. Investors and support organisations should develop frameworks that recognise and leverage 'negotiated embeddedness' as a core business competency. institutional voids, entrepreneurial agency, qualitative research, business environment, negotiated embeddedness, Angola This paper provides a novel, empirically grounded theorisation of 'negotiated embeddedness' as a central mechanism for venture operation in weak institutional settings, moving beyond binary depictions of constraint versus innovation.

Keywords: *Institutional voids, Entrepreneurial agency, Sub-Saharan Africa, Qualitative case study, Post-conflict economy, Business environment*

Article Highlights

- Identifies 'negotiated embeddedness' as a core mechanism for operating within institutional voids.
- Over 70% of entrepreneurs create costly private alternatives for security and logistics.
- Agency is channeled into private substitution, potentially

Core Concept: Negotiated Embeddedness

The strategic engagement with informal networks to compensate for deficiencies in formal institutions, identified as a central theme for venture operation in Angola.

This qualitative study theorizes from 42 in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation.

<p>entrenching a dualistic economy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Calls for co-designing formal institutions with entrepreneurial stakeholders.	
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